

Congressman Wally Herger
Speech at the National Guard "Support our Troops Dinner"

December 20, 2005
Chico Elks Lodge

=====

Thank you for inviting me to be with you this evening.

I especially want to thank Dan and Connie Henry, and Larry Juanarena, for their hard work in organizing this event. In addition, I want to thank the sponsors, community members, and National Guard families who have embraced and supported this important cause. You should be incredibly proud of your efforts in making this event a resounding success!

We are here tonight to honor our men and women in uniform who are serving our nation in Iraq and around the world. And to thank them for their continuing commitment to our nation and the cause of freedom. It is because of their service and sacrifice that we are able to live in a country that is free, secure and prosperous. So I want to thank them for everything they have done and are doing for us!

Our troops need to know that the nation continues to be 100 percent behind them and their mission in Iraq. It is largely because of their pursuit of terrorists around the world that there have been no attacks on American soil since September 11, 2001. By staying on the offensive and taking the battle to the enemy, they have made America safer!

Regrettably, I am speaking to you tonight at a time when there has been some criticism of our decision to remove Saddam Hussein's murderous regime, and of our continuing presence in Iraq. Some have questioned the justification for this war. Some have even called for an immediate withdraw. While I respect their opinions, I could not disagree more.

Saddam Hussein had a long history of hostility toward his neighbors and his own people. He invaded two countries in two decades. He supported terrorism, and gave large sums of money to the families of suicide bombers who murdered Israeli civilians.

He used weapons of mass destruction on the Iranian people – and on his own people. Indeed, he is directly responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. Scores of mass graves have been found in Iraq. The brutality of his torturous regime was unspeakable. In fact, Saddam Hussein by definition was himself a "Weapon of Mass Destruction."

He defied international demands to allow weapons inspectors to have full access to potential weapons sites in Iraq. Even when inspectors were allowed in, Saddam grossly misled them, and actively concealed his weapons programs.

Considering the brutality of his regime, his history of using weapons of mass destruction, and his support for terrorists, he represented a real threat to America's security that, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, could not be ignored.

We made the correct decision to remove him from power, and the world is better off now that he sits in a jail cell awaiting trial, instead of plotting his next invasion, redeveloping his weapons programs, or supporting terrorism.

This battle for the future of Iraq is now the most critical front in the War on Terrorism. In fact, al Qaeda itself recognizes its profound importance. Usama Bin Laden's top deputy recently wrote that Iraq is the "greatest battle" in their pursuit for a fanatical religious regime in the Middle East.

Step one in al Qaeda's plan to conquer Iraq and the Middle East is to "Expel the Americans from Iraq." Al Qaeda recognizes the importance of the battle for Iraq. And so must we.

That is why it remains in America's interest to have a military role in Iraq until the Iraqi Security Forces can stand on their own and defend their democracy. As President Bush has stated, we will stand down when the Iraqis can stand up.

And despite news reports depicting a grim situation on the ground, the truth is there has been tremendous progress in Iraq. When I was there last year, I saw the tremendous commitment and skill of the men and women of our military – from the 4-star general on down to the private. And I saw the hunger for freedom in the eyes of the Iraqi people I talked to.

Since then, considerably more progress has been made.

In October, the Iraqi People overwhelmingly ratified a democratic Constitution

Over 200,000 Iraqi Security Forces have been trained and equipped, and they are increasingly taking the lead in securing Iraqi cities

The Iraqi economy is growing, with over 30,000 new businesses established in the past two years

With the help of the American military, substantial progress has been made in improving essential services, such as electricity, water, health care, new schools, and transportation

Perhaps most important, many Sunni Arabs have joined Shiites and Kurds in participating in the political process. Just five days ago, this process took an enormous step forward when an estimated 10 million voters – approximately 66 percent of registered voters – elected their permanent leaders.

By voting in such large numbers in the face of threats of violence and suicide attacks, the Iraqi People sent a resounding message to the terrorists: that they cannot break their resolve and will not stop their march toward freedom. The naysayers have said it couldn't be done, that you couldn't create a democracy in the Middle East. But look what has been accomplished in just three short years!

Although progress is steady, our mission is not complete. The terrorists there are still dangerous. They desire to create instability among the Iraqi People, and ultimately they want to topple the

new government. They believe that a stable democracy in Iraq would represent an enormous defeat for their agenda. And they are right.

That is why it would be a terrible mistake to cut and run. It would demonstrate that America lacks the resolve to complete an important mission. It would reverse the progress that we have made, and make it easier for terrorists to find shelter in the heart of the Middle East.

The American sacrifices in the War on Terror have been considerable, and I want to offer my deepest sympathies to the families of service members who have lost their lives protecting our freedom and security. Our grateful nation will always remember their service. The best and only way to honor their sacrifice is to win these crucial battles.

I also want to thank the families who are with us today for their tremendous support – because they, too, have sacrificed tremendously. I know how difficult it must be for the military families who are separated this holiday season. You are in our thoughts and prayers during this especially difficult period.

In closing, the War on Terrorism is a struggle between good and evil. Freedom-loving nations like ours are fighting an enemy that has no rules for engagement. This enemy doesn't hesitate to kill innocent women and children. They long to use any available weapon to unleash mass murder in America. One of their primary objectives is to see the United States lose her will and stop fighting. And let me tell you, this is not going to be easy. This is a war unlike any we have seen or experienced. And it is likely to continue for many years.

But if we stand firm, I remain confident that history will record our missions in Iraq and Afghanistan as profound victories in the War on Terrorism. If we stand firm, al Qaeda will be further weakened, freedom will flourish, and America will be more secure. We absolutely must stand firm.

As our nation fights this war, we will continue to firmly support our military, the finest fighting force the world has ever seen. They are in my thoughts and prayers each day. May God bless them, their families, and our great country. Thank you.